

THE 40-YEAR-OLD HELI-SKI VIRGIN

HELI-SKIING IS BETTER DONE LATE THAN NEVER

BY LORI KNOWLES

PHOTO: RANDY LINCIS/ANDREW DORAN

It was the end of a long, cold, slow winter — the kind people whine about in my city. Snow piled high on side streets. Over-laden cars were plowed-in and unable to move. The sun seldom made an appearance, and when it did its intensity wasn't powerful enough to pierce the chill. Then the call came through: Would I like to try heli-skiing?

There was a single spot on a late-March expedition into British Columbia's South Chilcotan Mountains. TLH Heliskiing runs deep-powder excursions out of Tyax Wilderness Resort & Spa. It's about 200 miles inland from Canada's feral west coast in a range of sharply tipped, effulgent white peaks too far from civilization for steady traffic — or any kind of traffic. I would be a lone, 40-something woman in a group of... who knew? It would be eight strangers, plus me, a heli-ski virgin.

My inclination was to refuse: fear of going too deep, fear of inadequacy, and fear of leaving my young family. But I said yes... yes because as a lifetime skier, I instinctively knew heli-skiing is a rite of passage — as is witnessing a Hahnenkamm, skiing Highland Bowl at Aspen, or tasting the warmth and smoothness of a fondue cooked in a *caquelon* in France's Haute-Savoie region.

I was picked up in Whistler by a van full of strangers: two unspeaking Austrians, two Dutchmen clad in black leather, and a family of four Italians from the sweet, sunny city of Bolzano in Trentino-Alto Adige (Südtirol). We rode as strangers in edgy silence for six hours, first on the winding Sea-to-Sky highway northward from Whistler, then on a washboard-gravel path onward from Lillooet. Seated up front, next to the driver, I was warned to watch for falling boulders. "I've had trips where the passengers had to get out and move the rocks so the van could move forward," the driver told me. Like a bird of prey, my eyes were riveted.



Tyax Lodge is a long, caramel-colored log building on the brim of a lake on the edge of nowhere. Inside there's a stoked fire, a table full of tapas, and a deck that spills into the British Columbian wilderness. At Tyax, the trees are the height of high rises in New York City and just as thick. After check-in, I watched from my balcony as a chopper landed by the lake, the silver water whirling into whitecaps. A slew of tired heli-skiers tumbled out; crouched, and huddled as the bird flew away. That would be me tomorrow, I thought. My tummy did a back flip.

But when tomorrow broke, the sun was nowhere. There were large flakes falling like goose down onto the front lawn of the lodge, and the guides were frowning. Poor visibility, they said. We would have to bide our time; wait for a clearing. I spent the morning fully dressed — ski pants, jacket, helmet, avvy backpack and beacon fully charged and at the ready. The wait was nail biting. We finally got the call to move out at 2:59 p.m., and to the lake “we ran like young wild furries” (McCammon). The chopper swooped in. We loaded on. We were lifted high into the South Chilcotans. All of it was breathtaking.

We landed on top of the world. There was nothing around us but scalded black rock and snow-white terrain. As far as my eyes could see: white. It was the highest peak around and I was on it, crouched low and still, just as my guide had taught me, hugging my pack, hearing nothing but the roar of an engine and feeling the thwack of the chopper's blades beating against the wind as the pilot lifted off. Then, silence: blissful, mind-bending silence. I raised my eyes to thousands of pointed peaks in every direction.

My first run I could hear two things: the swooshing of snow and my own heart beating. I'd shoved forward, nervously, off a peak at about 9,000 feet. I was turning rhythmically in powder that was thigh-deep. It was as soft and airy as a fluffy white cloud must feel



to an airplane pilot. It wasn't at all scary. I entered a dream state that day — a state that took me a whole week to break out of.

We skied the first day until about 5:30 p.m. — the latest our guides had ever gone. As we flew out, the sunset was a deep pink blanket that lay over the mountains. Out there, ages from civilization, I doubted I'd seen anything as comforting. The staid Austrians had huge smiles on their faces. The Italian family — with two sons helping celebrate their parents' 60th birthdays — was hugging one another. The Dutchmen — rally car drivers from the Netherlands — were singing *Gimme Shelter*.

That night's dinner was at a long, family-style table; the broad windows of Tyax Lodge at one end, a fire with leaping flames at the other. The iciness among us strangers had finally melted. Somehow we'd shifted from foreigners to kindred spirits who'd shared something very special. We'd stood at the top of a B.C. mountain peak, a very long way from anywhere, with nothing but snow and rock and wind around us, and then we'd skied down it.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

1. Starry, starry night at TLH's lakeside lodge.
2. Unlimited powder turns.
3. Good food and fine wine end a heli-ski day.
4. Lori, the heli-ski virgin.
5. TLH terrain includes 1 million acres and 375 runs.

“WHAT MAKES A WOMAN GO HELI-SKIING ALONE?”



PHOTOS: RANDY LUNCKS/ANDREW DORAN (TLH), MARLEE CORRA (LORI KNOWLES)

There were warm smiles, and tales told, and wine poured. Our hearty guides told us stories of wolverines and winter camping, and withstanding the Canadian wilderness for days alone in the backcountry. Soup bowls were filled, bread was broken, enormous platefuls of beef and fish and pasta came and went. “Lori,” I was finally asked, “What makes a woman go heli-skiing alone?”

The entire table fell silent. Eyes turned to me and waited. I wanted to say, “It's not so unusual for a woman to heli-ski,” but as it isn't true, I couldn't. The two long tables next to ours were filled with German- and Russian-speaking men of great girth and stature — men make up 80 percent of Canadian heli-ski operators' clients. Instead I said, “I'm over 40 and I'd never been heli-skiing. It was something I had to do. Until today, I was a virgin.”

There were nods all around. The Austrians, the Italians, and the rally car drivers from Holland — all of them got it. Someone raised a glass. Someone else toasted: “Here's to 40-year-old heli-ski virgins.”

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80% 20%

POWDER FACT
80 percent of Canada's heli-skiers are male, 20 percent female.
— Canada West Ski Areas Association, anecdotal.